Jewish Life and Practice: The Life Cycle  
RB-INTD-015  
Instructor: Daniel Klein  
Hebrew College Rabbinical School  

Fall 2013-2014/5774 - Fridays 11:30am-1:00pm  

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Course Goals  
The goals of this course are to:  
- Understand the classical ideas that are the source for Jewish life cycle rituals;  
- Become familiar with the traditional practices and terminology of life cycle rituals;  
- Explore modern complexities of these rituals and multiple approaches to them;  
- Reflect on our own understanding and experience of these rituals with an eye towards how, as educators and clergy, we may work with them.  

We will integrate primary text study, secondary readings and our own personal encounters with and reflections on ritual practice in order to build fluency and comfort in the practice of Judaism.  

Course Requirements:  

1. **Regular attendance.** If you miss more than one session you will need to make up the class by writing a summary (750 words) of the topic for that week.  
2. **Thoughtful reading of the week’s assignments.** Please come prepared to participate actively. There will be an expectation of honest and respectful dialogue in all class sessions. Readings will be in required books, on our class Schoology site, or handed out in class.  
3. **Class journal.** Please spend 15-20 minutes per week “journaling” in response to the class. This written response is meant to be personal, reflective and informal. These assignments are due by email on each Tuesday following the class.  
4. **Weekly quiz.** There will be a short quiz each week at the beginning of class on key terms and phrases from the assigned reading for that week.  
5. **Presentation.** Please focus on any one of the topics we cover this semester and prepare a presentation to the class reflecting on the traditional Jewish practice or ritual and considering one or more alternative ways you might celebrate or observe this practice. We will spend two sessions at the end of the semester dedicated to class presentations of your projects (10 minutes each). **Proposals are due November 8.**  
6. **End of Semester Take Home Exam.** We will have a test of terms and concepts that we learn over the course of the semester. It will be important to keep and maintain notes of the terms we cover.
**Required Books:**

Rachel Biale, *Women and Jewish Law*
Isaac Klein, *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice*
Maurice Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*

In addition to these books, students are also expected to own a Hebrew/English Tanakh. Please bring the Tanakh with you to class each week.

**Course Schedule**

**Friday, September 20 – No class, Sukkot**

**Tuesday, September 24 – Introduction to the Course: Ritual and Covenant**

- **Guiding Questions**
  1. How are life events lifecycle events?
  2. How do you understand ritual? What is its purpose?
  3. What is a brit, or covenant? Where does the idea of having a brit with God come from?
  4. Do the ideas of covenant and mitzvah continue to have power and relevance in contemporary Jewish life?

- **Readings**

**Friday, September 27 – No class, Simchat Torah**

**Friday, October 4 – Signs of the Covenant: Brit Milah and Brit Bat**

- **Guiding Questions**
  1. What are the origins for the mitzvah of circumcision?
  2. What traditional rationales/interpretations have been offered for the mitzvah of circumcision?
  3. What are the elements in the ceremony of circumcision?
  4. What should a birth ritual for a girl include? To what extent should it be modeled on and parallel brit milah?
Readings

- Genesis 17:1-14, 34:13-17; Exodus 6:10-12; Deuteronomy 30:1-10; Jeremiah 6:10

Friday, October 11 – Talmud Torah: Education, Torah Study and Bar/Bat Mitzvah

Guiding Questions

1. What is the mitzvah of Talmud Torah? Where does it come from and to whom does it apply?
2. What is Torah Lishmah? How does it relate to the value of study that leads to action?
3. What are the obligations of parents to children in terms of Talmud Torah?
4. What is the significance of a bar/bat mitzvah?

Readings

- Rachel Biale, *Women and Jewish Law*, pp. 29-43
- David Kraemer, “What Does Bar/Bat Mitzvah Really Signify?!" in *Conservative Judaism* 53, pp. 3-8

Friday, October 18 - The Jewish Wedding: Kinyan or Brit

Guiding Questions

1. What is kinyan and what role does it play in a Jewish wedding?
2. What are the other elements in a traditional Jewish wedding?
3. What attitudes and assumptions about gender and sexuality are reflected in the traditional Jewish wedding?
4. What, if any, changes might you suggest to a couple planning a Jewish wedding? How would you balance tradition and innovation?

Readings

- Rachel Biale, *Women and Jewish Law*, pp. 44-69
Friday, October 25 – Taharat HaMishpacha (Family Purity)

➢ Guiding Questions

1. What are the essential elements in the observance of taharat ha mishpacha?
2. What traditional interpretations are offered for these practices?
3. What attitudes towards human sexuality are reflected in Jewish law governing sexual relations within marriage?
4. Do we need family purity laws today? If so, what should they be?

➢ Readings

- Rachel Biale, Women and Jewish Law, pp. 147-174 (121-146 if time)
- Blu Greenberg, How to Run a Traditional Jewish Household, pp. 120-136

Friday, November 1 – Visit To Mayyim Hayyim Community Mikveh

1838 Washington Street, Auburndale (Newton) / 617-244-1836
Meet there at noon. Class will end at 1:30 p.m.

November 8 – Death and Mourning

➢ Guiding Questions

1. What are the origins and central texts of the Jewish funeral?
2. What are the traditional stages of mourning in Jewish law?
3. What are the central laws and customs of shiva?
4. What does one do during a “shiva visit”?

➢ Readings

- Maurice Lamm, The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning (entire book)

Presentation Proposals Due

November 15 – Visit To Levine Chapel Funeral Home

470 Harvard Street, Brookline / 617 277 8300
Meet there at noon. Class will end at 1:30 p.m.
Guiding Questions

1. What are the key elements in the story of Hanukkah as told in the First and Second Maccabees? In the Talmud? In the prayerbook?
2. What is the central message of the Hanukkah according to each account? Is Hanukkah a story of national heroism, religious zealotry, spiritual persistence and/or divine intervention?
3. What is *pirsum hanes* and how is it reflected in the lighting of the Hanukkah candles?
4. What is the contemporary significance of Hanukkah in North America?

Readings

- I Maccabees chapter 4
- II Maccabees chapters 3-8
- Noam Zion, *A Different Light*, eds. Noam Zion and Barbara Spectre, pp. 151-167 (handout)

December 6 – Illness and Suffering

Guiding Questions

1. What are the mitzvot concerning caring for and visiting the sick?
2. How does the tradition view illness? What are some of the classic Jewish responses to suffering?

Readings

- Maimonides, Laws of Visiting the Sick, Chapter 14
- Talmud Bavli, Brachot 5a-b (two sugyot)

Take Home Exam Distributed

December 13

Presentations

December 20

Presentations

Take Home Exams Due